

## John F. Kennedy's Decision-Making on the Berlin Crisis of 1961

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### Abstract

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This article examines the U.S. decision-making on the Berlin crisis of 1961. The author argues that this conflict was a serious challenge to the Kennedy crisis management system which was substantially modified during and after these dramatic events. Particularly, the center of decision-making shifted from traditional actors, such as the State and Defense departments or CIA to the National Security Council staff and presidential advisers. On a more general plane, the Berlin crisis has stimulated the development of both theory and practice of strategic planning and crisis management. The Berlin conflict management experience was useful for dealing with other international crises which happened during the Kennedy administrations (including the most dangerous one – the Cuban missile crisis of 1962).

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**Keywords:** Berlin crisis of 1961, U.S. decision-making, John F. Kennedy

### Introduction

The efficiency of the U.S. decision-making on the Berlin crisis of 1961 is still a vexed question in the world research literature. Some authors consider this case as a triumph of John F. Kennedy's political wisdom and an example of an effective foreign policy planning (Morris 1973: 466-67; Salinger 1966: 191-99; Schlesinger 1965: 346-47; Sidey 1964: 202; Sorensen 1966: 662-63).

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Other scholars describe it as an evidence of the U.S. foreign policy machinery's crisis (if not a complete failure) which led to erroneous (and dangerous) decisions and, consequently, to worsening the U.S.-Soviet relations (Beschloss 1991; Catudal 1980; Freedman 2000; Kern et al. 1983: 76).

Many aspects of this problem are still not clear to its students. How, by whom and why have been decisions taken? Is the Kennedy administration responsible for the escalation of the Berlin crisis? Or responsibility should be solely laid on the Soviet side? Was the Berlin Wall really a surprise to the White House or not? Was there a secret deal (or at least a tacit agreement) between JFK and Nikita Khrushchev on the border-closing between East and West Berlin? These and other research questions are still open to discussion.

This study focuses on how Kennedy's policy on the Berlin crisis was shaped. There are three main research objectives with this study: *First*, to examine Kennedy's (and his team's) perceptions of the Berlin problem and Khrushchev's intentions. *Second*, to identify principal actors and their roles (both formal and informal) in policy-making on the Berlin issue. *Third*, to examine the procedural aspects of the U.S. decision-making during the crisis period (February-October 1961).

### **Perceptions: clouded lens of the Cold War warriors**

Similar to his Soviet counterpart Khrushchev, Kennedy's perception of the Berlin question was ideologically indoctrinated. He saw this issue through the prism of a global competition between capitalism and socialism. To his mind, Khrushchev's Berlin policy was a challenge to the 'Free World' rather than a real intention to solve the problem of the German reunification (Kempe 2011). Hence, Kennedy's 'duty' was to contain the Soviet threat and protect freedom of West Europe.

In fact, JFK was predetermined for confrontation on Berlin since his presidential election campaign. As early as in July 1960 Kennedy predicted that the Soviet leader will "face the next President of the United States with a very difficult decision, perhaps even an ultimatum on Berlin". He added: "We should make it very clear that we are going to meet our commitment to defend the liberty of the people of West Berlin, and that if Mr. Khrushchev pushes it to the ultimate, we are prepared to meet our obligation" (Schlesinger 1965: 346-47).

The U.S. President's assessment of Soviet policies in Europe often sounded like a description of devil's intentions: "it is designed to neutralize West Germany as a first step in the neutralization of Western Europe. That is what makes the present situation so dangerous. West Germany is the key as to whether Western Europe will be free". According to JFK, the Soviets intended to destroy NATO: "if we don't meet our commitments in Berlin, it will mean the destruction of NATO and dangerous situation for the whole world. All Europe is at stake in West Berlin" (Schlesinger 1965: 346-47).

There was a difference of opinion among presidential advisers with regards to the Berlin issue. At least, three main groups could be identified:

- Dean Acheson, ex-Secretary of State and Kennedy's informal adviser on Berlin, exemplified a hawkish approach. He considered West Berlin as a starting point for Khrushchev' anti-American and anti-Western global strategy. To his mind, in case of Berlin, the Soviet purpose was to test the American will. Kennedy and Acheson diverged on methods of crisis management. Acheson opposed to any negotiations with Moscow. "Only by winning the test of will can we change the Soviets' purpose", he wrote in his paper that was prepared for the National Security Council (NSC) meeting of June 29, 1961, "Only thus can we demonstrate that what they want to do is not possible" (Foreign Relations of the United States 1993: 140; McGeorge Bundy to the President, April 4, 1961; National Security Council Action 2432 1980; Schlesinger 1965: 381-82).

Acheson has proposed some measures to demonstrate the U.S. firmness such as partial mobilization, deployment of additional American troops to Europe, creation of an airlift in case of West Berlin blockade, increase in the U.S. stocks of non-nuclear ammunition in Europe, counter-measures on the high seas, placing strategic submarines and other nuclear forces in a suitable state of readiness, economic sanctions against the Soviet bloc, etc. Kennedy took a more moderate position and was ready to accept only some of the Acheson's proposals. Moreover, he didn't want to exclude the possibility of negotiations with the Soviets as Acheson suggested.

As a recent archival search demonstrated, some key White House officials and the President himself briefly considered proposals for a limited nuclear first strike against Soviet military targets if the Berlin crisis turned to be violent (Burr 2001; Kaplan 2001). In September 1961, the NSC staffer Carl Kaysen has prepared a study on the possibility of a limited first strike against the Soviet Union. What motivated Kaysen was his concern that the U.S. nuclear war plan - the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) – aimed at a total (large scale) nuclear war with the Soviet Union and its allies. He wanted the President to have military alternatives that involved less loss of life in the Soviet Union and less danger to U.S. territory. Therefore, he proposed contingency planning for a limited nuclear first strike on the handful of Soviet ICBMs. Kaysen recognized that there were risks and uncertainties in such a plan, but he nevertheless believed that a limited approach would encourage the Soviets to avoid attacks on U.S. urban-industrial targets (Carl Kaysen to General Maxwell Taylor 1961).

There was a series of discussions on Kaysen's memo among the high-ranking military and presidential officials. Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Lyman Lemnitzer has opposed the Kaysen plan because he did not believe that a nuclear conflict could be stopped at a lower (limited) phase and sooner or later it would develop into a large-scale nuclear war for which the SIOP was better designed (Memorandum for General Taylor from General Lemnitzer 1961). Kennedy himself was concerned about the fact that Moscow had quite a sizeable nuclear arsenal and the Soviet military needed only several minutes to launch their missiles in a response attack (Memorandum of Conference with President Kennedy 1998: 130-131). For these reasons, JFK tacitly rejected the Kaysen plan and preferred a non-military solution to the Berlin problem.

- Some top officials disagreed with both the President and Acheson on the judgment of the Soviet intentions. For instance, Ambassadors Llevelyn Thompson and Averel Harriman viewed Khrushchev's purposes as strictly limited. Thompson argued that a predominant Soviet motive was a desire to improve the Communist positions in East Europe rather than to arrange a world-wide political humiliation of the United States. Thompson wrote in his memo to the Secretary of State (June 19, 1961):

"...his [Khrushchev's - A.S.] principal objectives:

1. To stabilize the regime in East Germany and prepare a way for the eventual recognition of the East Germany regime;
2. To legalize the eastern frontiers of Germany;
3. To neutralize Berlin as a first step and prepare for its eventual take-over by the GDR;
4. To weaken if not break up the NATO alliance; and
5. To discredit the United States or at least seriously damage our prestige.

I do not think this latter point is his principal objective since his Free City proposal was in fact designed to accomplish his objectives while saving face for us. I believe that Khrushchev was surprised and disappointed at our reaction to his proposal" (Llewellyn E. Thompson to the Secretary of State 1961: 1).

Most of the NSC staff members solidarized with this position as well. For example, on Moscow's purpose to weaken NATO Walt Rostow wrote: "The Soviets probably regard this aim as a by-product, however, as they cannot be sure that, in pressing their demands, they would not strengthen NATO in the final analysis" (Soviet Handling of the Berlin Problem 1961: 9).

In fact, Khrushchev confirmed this assumption in his memoirs. According to the former Soviet leader, the principal goal of the Berlin Wall's construction was to stop a refugee flow from East Berlin and to prevent the Walter Ulbricht regime (GDR) from an economic and political catastrophe (Khrouchtchev 1991: 210-211; Zubok 1993). He had no intention to undermine Western allies' positions in West Berlin or blockade the city.

The "dove" faction favored the policy of a limited military build-up, but, first of all, it proposed a diplomatic offensive, including negotiations with Moscow. In their confidential papers they were quite pragmatic and didn't overestimate the importance of West Berlin for the U.S. national interests. They were ready to use West Berlin as an instrument in horse-trading with Moscow.

Marc Ruskin, the NSC staff member, wrote to his boss McGeorge Bundy, the Special Assistant to the President on National Security Affairs: "From the politico-military point of view, West Berlin is of no particular value, except that the West has incurred a moral liability to protect its 2,250,000 inhabitants from being overrun by communism. Strategically, the Western position is almost untenable. Economically, it is unprofitable. Legally, the West has foolishly neglected to obtain an ironclad agreement to its rights of access".

Then he made a proposal that could be seen by the West Germans as blasphemous act: "Another alternative would be the exchange of territories with East Germany so that West Berlin falls within the East German zone and West Germany receives in return a piece of territory equal or greater in size to West Berlin. The suggested area would be Magdeburg (...) West Berliners would have the choice of moving to Magdeburg and the citizens of Magdeburg would have the choice of moving to West Berlin".

Ruskin foresaw a negative reaction from West Berliners: "A further problem of course is the sensitivity of people like Billie Brandt. It is one thing to be the mayor of Berlin. It is another thing to be the mayor of Magdeburg" (Marc Ruskin to McGeorge Bundy 1961: 2-4.). It is obvious that for the NSC staffers feelings of West Berliners were of less importance than the liquidation of the source of a serious security threat. Naturally, they have never made their views public. For the broad public they demonstrated their readiness to meet American commitments to West Berliners as the Achesonians did.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk had a position of his own that could be characterized as a *realpolitik* approach. He opposed to a full-scale military build-up and proclamation of a state of national emergency. At the same time, he disagreed with the proponents of immediate negotiations with Moscow. His position was to keep the status quo. Rusk was sure that if the U.S. and NATO would demonstrate their reluctance to negotiate with Moscow Khrushchev will return - after a series of diplomatic offensives - to his former position (as he had done in case of the previous Berlin crisis of 1958-1959) (Memorandum of Meeting on Berlin 1961: 2; Schlesinger 1965: 383; Schoenbaum 1988: 338, 344).

These disaccords between the senior officials prevented the administration from an effective formulation of its strategy towards Berlin.

According to Richard Walton, domination of the ideological approach to Berlin conflict made the Washington's initial position inflexible (Walton 1972: 81.). Inadequate perceptions, various prejudices generated by the Cold War way of thinking made the Kennedy administration responsible for aggravation of the Berlin problem. Khrushchev was an initiator of the new Berlin crisis. However, Kennedy, in fact, contributed to the further escalation of the conflict by taking a rigid position.

### **The Ring of Power: Formal and Informal Actors**

Similar to the previous international conflicts, the U.S. decision-making system on the Berlin crisis included the State and Defense departments (DoS and DoD), CIA, White House staff and the NSC. However, this system had its peculiarity under the Kennedy rule.

For example, Secretary Rusk tried to reform the State Department's structure and procedures to make it more efficient. However, he was unable to do that because he could not form a team of his own in the Foggy Bottom. Kennedy allowed him to bring to the DoS only one close associate - John McGhee - who was appointed a head of the policy planning staff (Schoenbaum 1988: 267). This was a key position in the State but it was insufficient to radically reform the Department. The Foggy Bottom's bureaucracy, who considered Rusk as an inexperienced man in diplomacy, was suspicious about his reformist intentions.

One of the few Rusk's successful innovations was creation of an Operations Center headed by Theodore C. Achilles and situated on the 7th floor of the Department's building (next door to the Secretary's office) (Catudal 1980: 77-78). Rusk realized the necessity of such a center during the Laos crisis which was inherited by JFK from the previous administration. However, it was established only during the Bay of Pigs operation (April 1961). This unit played an important role during the Berlin crisis as well.

Rusk favored handling of international crises on the regional basis. For this reason, the principal State's unit which was responsible for Berlin policy was the Bureau on European Affairs led by a distinguished American diplomat Foy Kohler.

The German desk headed by Martin Hillenbrand was in charge with the Berlin issue within the European bureau (R.W. Komer to Henry Kissinger 1961; Ausland & Richardson 1966: 292-93). These career diplomats were the most authoritative members of the inter-department Berlin task force which played the central role in the administration's decision-making on Berlin.

The DoS field operations were directed by the U.S. Ambassador to Bonn Walter Dowling who was ex-officio the head of the American diplomatic mission in West Berlin (Catudal 1980: 130). Dowling assigned one of his senior officers Francis Williamson to manage routine work on Berlin. Allan Lightner with a small staff of low-key diplomats was the State's official representative in West Berlin.

There were a lot of discords between the Foggy Bottom and field officers. Lightner's political adviser Howard Trivers believed that the DoS representatives in Germany were informed better than their colleagues in Washington. At the same time, Hillenbrand's team often ignored field officers and nicknamed them 'Berlinits', 'localists' (Catudal 1980: 131). In John Ausland's opinion (staff member of the German desk), Lightner was strongly influenced by the military (especially by General Lucius Clay, President's special representative in Berlin) and was unable to generate fresh ideas of diplomatic nature. Ausland criticized Lightner for the lack of coordination with allied representatives in Berlin. "In Washington we were working closely with our allies", he remembered, but Lightner "wanted to have as little to do with the Brits and French as possible and run a unilateral show" (Catudal 1980: 132).

Although these internal tensions shouldn't be overestimated they to some extent prevented the State Department from the development of a consistent Berlin course.

The DoS was the agency that did a routine work rather than took strategic decisions on Berlin. Its functions in the decision-making process can be identified as follows:

- gathering information;
- processing information and preparing it for the top-level decision-makers;
- implementing decisions taken at the top.

The only person - Secretary Rusk - was a real decision-maker in the DoS because he has been seen as a key President's foreign policy adviser.

The DoD was responsible for contingency planning, intelligence and military operations (National Security Action Memorandum no. 41 1961). Strategic planning and operational control over the U.S. forces in Germany were in the Joint Chiefs Staffs Committee's competence. The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) through its stations in Berlin and West Germany was responsible for recruitment of agents and gathering sensitive information on East Germany. The political aspects of the Berlin issue were handled by the Assistant Secretary Paul Nitze who worked in a close contact with the Foggy Bottom (Gelb 1986: 126).

There was a quite complex and cumbersome system of the DoD field management in Europe. The Commander-in-Chief General Lauris Norstad's headquarter was in Paris. The Army staff was located in Heidelberg while the Air Force staff was in Wiesbaden. For this reason, Pentagon's representatives in Berlin were unable quickly and effectively react to both ground and air threats. The American Commandant in Berlin couldn't control the Head of the U.S. Military Liaison Mission in Potsdam who reported directly to the Army staff in Heidelberg (Ausland & Richardson 1966: 296-297). The management system was enormously puzzled by the appointment of General Lucius Clay as a President's special representative in Berlin who often acted over the heads of the U.S. military and diplomatic representatives in Germany. General Norstad and other top military officials in Europe were often distressed by his activities (Gelb 1986: 247).

Since Pentagon's reputation was heavily damaged by the Bay of Pig fiasco, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara was quite passive during the Berlin crisis and intervened the decision-making process only upon the presidential request. Moreover, he was busy with the introduction of the well-known "planning-programming-budgeting" system in his department and couldn't pay much attention to the Berlin issue.

The CIA was even in a worse position than Pentagon. Kennedy laid the main responsibility for the Cuban fiasco on Langley and restricted both agency's powers and its role in the decision-making process. The CIA director Allen Dulles realized that his resignation was predetermined and – similar to McNamara – avoided any attempt to directly intervene the decision-making on Berlin (Catudal 1980: 242).

The President blamed the CIA for its inability to foresee the construction of the Berlin wall although it was nearly impossible because of extraordinary secrecy in the Soviet and East German decision-making systems.<sup>2</sup> General Maxwell Taylor's investigation of the CIA activities demonstrated that CIA informants in East Berlin reported on accumulation of the barbed wire and construction materials in the Soviet sector of occupation. However, they were unable to predict the Wall construction and the exact date of border-closing (Catudal 1980: 243). In the aftermath of the Berlin crisis, the White House used these intelligence failures as an excuse for Dulles' resignation and the radical CIA reform.

Under these circumstances, the NSC staff headed by MacGeorge Bundy became the center-piece of the whole decision-making system. Bundy has eventually transformed his team from an advisory board to a decision-making body although Bundy himself denied it later during the 1965 hearings at the Henry Jackson Subcommittee on Policy-Making at the Presidential Level (The National Security Council 1965: 275-76). Upon his request the President abolished the NSC Policy and Operations Control boards which consisted of departments' representatives and prevented Bundy from the development of a centralized foreign policy course (The National Security Council 1965: 304-305; Robinson et al. 1966: 147). This action facilitated the transfer of power to the Bundy's hands within the NSC system.

Bundy centralized both the NSC structure and procedures. He reported to the NSC members at the first Council 's meeting: "...in response to the President's desires a different organization and procedures would henceforth be used in the work of the NSC, involving fewer and smaller staff groups composed of more senior personnel. Policy recommendations would be brought to the NSC without being observed by inter-agency processing but with adequate previous consultation and presentation of counter-proposals". To soften the negative reaction of the departments' heads Bundy stressed: "The preparation of such recommendations would require the full cooperation of all agencies in providing access to essential information" (National Security Council Action 2401 1980: 5).

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<sup>2</sup> According to Nikita Khrushchev's recollections, the decision on the Wall was taken by the narrow circle of the Soviet and GDR leaders - Khrushchev himself, Walter Ulbricht, Soviet Ambassador in Berlin Mikhail Pervoukhin and Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet troops in East Germany Ivan Yakoubovsky. Such secrecy has effectively prevented the leak of the information to Western intelligences. See Khrouchchev 1991: 211.

Bundy hired a number of young and talented men with an academic background to serve as the NSC staffers. People such as Henry Kissinger, Walt W. Rostow, Mark Ruskin, etc., were both experts and generators of ideas. Working climate was very constructive, the employees were not afraid to express their views and criticize what Bundy or even President himself proposed (Tanzer 1961: 29-44). Being closer to the ear of the President than other governmental agencies, the NSC staff has tried to seize control over the Berlin policy.

A number of other high-ranking White House officials interfered decision-making as well. The Special Counsel to the President Theodore Sorensen who cleared presidential speeches, Special Assistant to the President on Political Affairs Arthur Schlesinger and press-secretary Pierre Salinger were among them. Sometimes their interference was quite unceremonious and evoked a predictable resistance from other senior officials and agencies.

At the same time, JFK created an informal structure to conduct a secret diplomacy in case of international crises such as the Berlin and Cuban conflicts. He used his brother Robert Kennedy (Attorney General) to arrange a back channel to Khrushchev through Yuri N. Bolshakov (the then-deputy editor of the magazine "Soviet Union" and a high-ranking officer of the Soviet military intelligence's (GRU) station in Washington) (Beschloss 1991: 152-181; Salinger 1966: 191-199). Salinger had the same duty. He served as a messenger in the secret correspondence between Kennedy and Khrushchev (Salinger 1966: 191-199). These secret channels were created without informing other senior officials who expressed their displeasure with such a presidential style.

Given the 'tug-of-war' between different 'centers of power' a problem of coordination of various governmental agencies' activities was an important issue for the Kennedy administration.

### **Coordination or a Bureaucratic Warfare?**

From the very beginning the NSC staff and the DoS were the principle rivals with regard to the Berlin crisis. Bundy tried to destroy the State's monopoly on policy planning within the NSC system.

The preparation of policy recommendations on Berlin were assigned not to the Foggy Bottom but to the informal presidential adviser Dean Acheson who headed two special consultative groups that have been established in March and June of 1961 (Facts on File Feb. 16-22 & June 29-July 5, 1961). As some experts note, "it was another indication of the distrust the President had for the State Department, although not for its higher officials" (Robinson et al. 1966: 149).

Some White House officials tried to strengthen this distrust and destroy Kennedy-Rusk 'special relationship'. They criticized the Secretary for his 'inability' to define his personal position on the Berlin issue (Schoenbaum 1988: 273, 286-287.). In his memoirs, Schlesinger presented Rusk as 'Buddha-like' and 'irrevocably conventional' (Salinger 1966: 435).

The White House staff-DoS conflict stemmed from both the desire to establish control over the decision-making system and different approaches to the Berlin problem. The White House officials favored negotiations with Russians while the 'Achesonians' dominated the Foggy Bottom (Schoenbaum 1988: 340). The White House moderates were worried by Acheson's war-like recommendations. Schlesinger, Sorensen and Kissinger bombarded the President by memoranda that criticized the Acheson paper and urged JFK to start negotiations with Russians (Catudal 1980: 158-159; Sorensen 1966: 662-63). Under the White House staff' pressure Kennedy invited Rusk, McNamara and Taylor to an informal meeting at his family residence in Hyannis Port (July 8, 1961). He urged the Secretary of State to accelerate the preparation of a formal reply to Khrushchev's aide-memoire on Berlin which he presented during the May 1961 Vienna summit. The President also ordered the Defense Secretary to formulate a non-nuclear strategy on Berlin and prepare realistic recommendations for a conventional forces build-up (McGeorge Bundy to the Secretary of Defence, July-10, 1961). The results of this meeting can be seen as a real success of the White House staff.

The NSC staff's final victory over the Foggy Bottom was related to the so-called 'reply affair'. Upon his return from Vienna Kennedy assigned the DoS to draft the response to Khrushchev's memo on Berlin. According to Schlesinger and Sorensen, the Foggy Bottom delayed the reply for six weeks. In Schlesinger view, the draft was too lengthy and indistinct. He cited a White House official who regarded the State's draft "like the kind of speech Andrei Gromyko might make if he was on our side" (Schlesinger 1965: 384).

Sorensen drew a more global conclusion: to his mind, the Foggy Bottom was simply unable to handle complex diplomatic problems (Sorensen 1966: 661). The President's reaction to the alleged delay of the draft was quite fierce. At the Hyannis Port meeting Kennedy urged Rusk to hurry up his bureaucracy. He demanded from the State the report on the causes of the delay. Bundy insisted that the White House should supervise the decision-making process within the State Department (Catudal 1980: 154).

The 'reply story' sharpened the NSC staff-DoS conflict. As Gelb wrote, "...the White House contingent was convinced that the State Department was bogged down in bureaucratic hocus-pocus and that it had no idea of how to cope with the developing crisis" (cited in Gelb 1986: 89). The DoS people, conversely, thought little of the Kennedy's aids: "They had such tremendous self-confidence, such élan, such assuredness and glamour - and then you'd discover they really didn't know the facts" (Gelb 1986: 89).

Kennedy was indignant with the DoS manner of work: "Damn it, Bundy and I get more done in one day in the White House than they do in six months in the State Department" (Schlesinger 1965: 406). "The State Department is a bowl of jelly", he growled privately, "It's got all those people over there who are constantly smiling. I think we need to smile less and be tougher" (Sidey 1964: 202).

However, the 'reply story' and the talks about the State Department's inefficiency were, in fact, myths generated by the Kennedy's circle. Some years later it was known that there was no delay in drafting the document. State officials Foy Kohler and Martin Hillenbrand drafted the reply within a week and sent it to the White House. However, the NSC staff simply lost it. When it was discovered the Foggy Bottom sent a copy again but the NSC official Ralph Dungan locked it in the safe and went for two-week vacations (Schoenbaum 1988: 112).<sup>3</sup> In other words, the White House rather than the DoS should be blamed for the delay. Both Schlesinger and Sorensen knew about that because the investigation was made under their supervision. However, in their memoirs, they preferred to reproduce a wrong (but desirable) version.

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<sup>3</sup> As early as June 10, 1961 Bundy mentioned the first State's draft of reply in his memo to the President (McGeorge Bundy to the President, June 10, 1961 1993: 107).

Despite the questionable methods, the White House staff has managed to achieve its main objective - to discredit the Foggy Bottom and take control over the Berlin policy-making.

Kennedy asked Sorensen to rewrite the DoS draft of the reply to make it shorter and more polemic. Sorensen has produced a text which fully satisfied Kennedy. Sorensen has admitted later that this memo couldn't be an official diplomatic. That's why Kennedy called it a presidential statement to "explain" the official text (Sorensen 1966: 662-63).

The DoS officials, who were resented by the White House's unfair play, regarded the Sorensen draft as "essentially a political speech" that was "impossible to use in a diplomatic exchange". Hillenbrand added that "we would have become a laughingstock had the White House persisted in using it for anything more than a presidential gloss" (Schoenbaum 1988: 340). The formal reply was prepared by the DoS in a traditional for diplomatic documents manner and was issued on July 17, 1961 (American Foreign Policy 1974: 595-600; Stebbis 1962: 141-54). The Foggy Bottom stayed loyal to its rules and traditions regardless its rivals' intrigues.

Despite its victory in the power struggle the White House staff couldn't operate without the knowledge and experience of career diplomats and the military. For this reason, the President had to make a compromise: he formed the Berlin task force that consisted of the representatives of the State, Pentagon, CIA and White House staff and was co-chaired by Kohler (State) and Nitze (DoD). The personnel was recruited from the DoS German desk. Pentagon assigned Colonel Wilbur Showalter for that purpose (Gelb 1986: 126-127; Gerlach 1977: 269). The task force had no a fixed membership. Its meetings were attended by all interested officials. On some occasions, about 60 officials from nine different agencies attended the meetings (Gelb 1986: 126; McGeorge Bundy to the President, July 6, 1961).

The Berlin task force was unable to start its work for two months because of the above-mentioned inter-agency discrepancies. It began to function only at the end of July, i.e. just before the Wall construction (Catudal 1980: 138). In other words, the inter-agency coordination in the pre-Wall period was in fact lacking.

The Berlin task force had several functions:

First, it managed the DoS, DoD and CIA field activities. Information analysis of and its presentation for the superiors was the second function of the group.

John C. Ausland and Colonel Hung F. Richardson, the witnesses to the task force's activities, described a typical decision-making procedure as follows. The State task force staff began work during the crisis period about 8:00 a.m., assuming that they had not been in the Department's Operations Centre all night. If a problem called for a prompt decision, the responsible officer would call a meeting of Defense and Joint Staff officers for 9:00 or 9:30 a.m. He would also invite a White House representative. They would discuss a draft, generally prepared by the State representative. This would go to the task force meeting, with any disagreements noted, at 10:30 a.m. After discussion, the final text of the draft would be worked out by Assistant Secretary of State Kohler and Assistant Secretary of Defense Nitze, with military advice from the Joint Chiefs' representative, Major General David Gray. In case of necessity task force sent a memo to Rusk, McNamara or President (Ausland & Richardson 1966: 294).

The third function was the preparation of documents and advisory assistance to the so-called "ambassadorial group" consisted of allied ambassadors in Washington and headed by Kohler (Gelb 1986: 127).

Kennedy and the White House staff used to communicate with the Berlin task force over the heads of the departments which were represented in the group. As Ausland wrote, "...the operation was at times a bit rudderless. His [JFK - xxx] style was to deal directly with task force, either personally or more often through McGeorge Bundy or one of Mac's staff members. This frequently put us (at State) in very awkward positions. Many times my telegrams were cleared by JFK before they went to Rusk for signature. They indicated White House clearance usually by having Bundy's name down, but I often wondered what would happen if Rusk didn't agree with what we said" (Catudal 1980: 152).

It should be noted that on some occasions the President's style undermined group's coordinating efforts and brought confusion to handling the Berlin issue. However, in total the task force has managed to carry out its main function – coordination of inter-agency activities – and played a central role in decision-making on the Berlin crisis.

### **Policy Planning Process**

According to some accounts, there were four types of policy-planning during the Berlin crisis (Ausland & Richardson 1966: 299-301). The first one was a scenario writing which was used predominantly by the planners from the Berlin task force. The experts found that scenarios had a major advantage over analytical papers. They made it more difficult to skip over the possible consequences of given courses of action. The second type of planning was a more complex variant of scenario writing - war-peace game. The participants of the games were divided into three teams - red, blue and control. Every team wrote their papers on their possible actions and then compared them with each other.

Another planning device, used for Berlin, was the phased scenario. This involved dividing a brief scenario into a number of phases, with critical events marking the transition from one phase to another. The planners then listed the actions which might be useful in each phase. The main drawback to this type of planning was that it might become a straightjacket rather than a frame of reference.

The fourth category of planning was contingency plans. Contingency plans examined possible alternative responses to hypothetical events or situations. They often did not seek to establish definitely which response would be used, although they usually expressed preferences. They might also lead to delegation of authority, particularly to take preparatory actions. The charge most frequently leveled against contingency planning was that the events planned for never take place. Kennedy once telephoned an officer in the Berlin task force and asked, "Why, with all those plans, do you never have one for what happens?" (Ausland & Richardson 1966: 301) Many officials remembered later that when they became acquainted with contingency plans after the crisis's beginning they were disappointed because their triviality (Catudal 1980: 29-30). However, plans were necessary for mobilization in case of crisis and governmental agencies couldn't do without them. Contingency plans are usually the base for the operational plans which are designed for military action.

However, in case of Berlin these plans were not drafted because the administration intended to avoid the military conflict over the Berlin (Ausland & Richardson 1966: 301).

It should be noted that the policy planning experience obtained during the Berlin crisis was quite useful both for handling other international conflicts (the Caribbean crisis, Middle East and Vietnam conflicts, etc.) and further development of the U.S. crisis management and foreign policy making theories.

### **President's Role**

According to the U.S. Constitution and political traditions, the President has a prerogative to take final foreign policy decisions. He is being influenced by various factors and actors, such as bureaucracy, Congress, public opinion, interest groups, mass media, allies, etc. Usually, the President tries to balance inputs that come from all these actors to take an optimal decision. It is well-known that the quality of decisions depends on presidential leadership skills as well as efficiency of the decision-making system.

By the moment of his inauguration Kennedy was not prepared properly to conduct the U.S. foreign policy. Even Acheson, who later agreed to become Kennedy's consultant on Berlin policy, at the earlier phase, was very critical of the President (Catudal 1980: 44). Many governmental officials were quite unhappy with JFK's manner to go deeply into details. For example, Hillenbrand complained of Kennedy's interest in details of the Berlin problem while he had surprising gaps in his knowledge on Germany (Catudal 1980: 151-152).

In the pre-Vienna period Kennedy didn't pay much attention to shaping of the Berlin strategy. This work was limited to the Acheson group's activities and contingency planning in the Joint Chiefs (Catudal 1980: 43; National Security Council Action 2405 1980: 1-3; Rostow 1972: 224). JFK had no any specific position on Berlin at that time.

In the course of preparations for the Vienna summit JFK believed that the discussions on the nuclear test ban agreement and Laos will shape the summit agenda (Beschloss 1991: 211).<sup>4</sup> This can explain why Khrushchev's ultimatum on Berlin was a surprise for him and why his reaction to the Soviet aide-memoire was very emotional. Kennedy was offended by the fact that Khrushchev regarded him as a young and inexperienced man who must be given a lesson (Salinger 1966: 182). Kennedy's personal grudge *against* Khrushchev has negatively affected administration's decision-making on Berlin.

The hard work on formulation of the Berlin policy was started only after the Vienna summit. The President appointed Acheson again to be a head of a consultative group that was charged with drafting a paper for the NSC meeting on Berlin. As mentioned, Acheson proposed a substantial military build-up including call-up of the reserve, creation of six new divisions, deployment of two or three divisions to West Germany, creation of an airlift in case of Berlin's blockade, counter-measures on the high seas, increase in nuclear forces' readiness as well as the list of economic sanctions and propaganda measures (Foreign Relations of the United States, Berlin Crisis 1993: 144-148; National Security Council Action 2432 1980; Schlesinger 1965: 381-82.). Acheson admitted negotiations with the Soviets only if they would be ready for concessions. In that case the West also could agree to some concessions to make results more palatable to Moscow: an exchange of declarations assuring the Western and Soviet positions in Berlin; Western guarantees against espionage and subversion from West Berlin; Western promise to not deploy nuclear weapons to West Berlin and that the Western forces in Berlin would not exceed a level approximating their current combat strength and that the Western powers would recognize the Oder-Neisse boundary; stationing U.N. observers in Berlin to inspect and report on fulfillment of the above-mentioned reciprocal declarations by the Western powers, GDR and USSR.

The Acheson paper was discussed at the NSC meeting of June 29. Secretary of Treasure Dillon and some military officials raised objections to Acheson's recommendations to increase defense spending and arrange an airlift (Foreign Relations of the United States, Berlin Crisis 1993: 161-162).

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<sup>4</sup> His assuredness was especially surprising in the light of numerous State's position papers that were prepared for the President to indicate an importance of the Berlin issue and warn him on potential Khrushchev's diplomatic offensive (see, for-example: Foreign Relations of the United States, Berlin Crisis 1993: 71-75).

However, it was decided not to make substantive decisions on the basis of these first discussions, and the President assigned Bundy, in consultation with Kohler and others, to prepare a list of departmental assignments which might be carried forward in preparation for further discussions and an NSC decision.

Kennedy's first reaction to the conservatives' pressure was to follow their recommendations. He ordered the DoD to prepare recommendations on a garrison and civilian airlift by October 15, 1961, naval harassment and blockade of the Soviet bloc shipping by November 15, large scale non-nuclear ground action within the four month period after October 15 as it may be ordered and on keeping strategic aviation in a state of maximum readiness for flexible use over a prolonged period of crisis (Foreign Relations of the United States, Berlin Crisis 1993: 162-163; National Security Action Memorandum no. 58 1961: 1-2).

However, the Acheson report evoked a strong resistance from the White House and State moderates. According to the Schlesinger memo of July 7, the Acheson paper misinterpreted Khrushchev's intentions, ignored political aspects of the problem and paid too much attention to the question of the Western military access to West Berlin while other issues were missed (Arthur Schlesinger to the President, July 7, 1961: 1-2). Moreover, numerous reports from various governmental agencies that were responsible for assessment of economic aspects of war preparations (the Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization, Bureau of Budget, Council of Economic Advisers, etc.) told that any essential military build-up would be burdensome for the U.S. (Edward A. McDermott to Frank Cash 1961) At the Hyannis Port meeting (July 8) Kennedy asked the heads of departments to find political rather than military solutions to the Berlin problem.

At the July 13 NSC meeting the "Achesonians" undertook a counter-attack. MacNamara proposed - in addition to the Acheson recommendations - to proclaim a state of national emergency, return U.S. citizens from Europe, delay the dismissal of soldiers and officers who served their term, add some \$4.3 billion to the defense budget, etc. Rusk repeated his opposition to early negotiations with Russians on Berlin (Beschloss 1991: 247; Memorandum of Meeting on Berlin by McGeorge Bundy, July 17, 1961; National Security Council Action 2432 1980). However, the President disliked purely military measures.

In his instructions to the NSC members he asked to discuss economic sanctions and political pressure as an alternative to the military solutions (National Security Action Memorandum no.59 1961: 2-3).

Kennedy, who was gradually tending to a moderate approach, has realized that the NSC itself (in contrast with its staff) had become a vehicle for the "hawks". In fact, he was unable neither to develop nor implement his Berlin policy through this body. To bypass the NSC the President created an informal advisory board – the Berlin Steering Group - that consisted of Vice-President Lyndon Johnson, Rusk, MacNamara, Allen Dulles, Maxwell Taylor, Secretary of Treasury, Director of the USIA and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs (McGeorge Bundy to the President, July 6, 1961). The group met before the crucial NSC meeting of July 19 where the Berlin strategy was finally designed (Catudal 1980: 175, 180, 181; Foreign Relations of the United States 1993: 219-222). Kennedy convinced MacNamara and Rusk to take moderate positions. For example, MacNamara withdrew his proposal on proclamation of national emergency and agreed to cut down his request for additional defense appropriations from \$4.3 to \$3.2 billion. It was decided to ask Congress to adopt a resolution supporting the administration's Berlin strategy instead of declaring the state of national emergency. The NSC meeting that followed the informal group's session formally approved this decision in spite of the resistance of Acheson who felt himself betrayed by his former supporters (Catudal 1980: 181; Foreign Relations of the United States, Berlin Crisis 1993: 220; Memorandum of Discussion to the National Security Council by McGeorge Bundy 1961; National Security Council Action 2435 1980; National Security Action Memorandum no. 62 1961).

Since that time Kennedy almost didn't use the NSC as a forum for the development of the Berlin strategy. Decisions were taken by a narrow circle of top officials (predominantly from the White House and Berlin task force) under the general supervision of the President. The atmosphere of crisis facilitated the President's alienation from the NSC as a collective decision-making body. JFK simply used the crisis as an excuse to ignore the Council and act promptly without the NSC consent.

Speaking generally, we can see Kennedy's transformation from a relatively inexperienced politician to a strong political leader.

There was also a radical change in President's performance: from underestimation of the Berlin problem and the lack of clear position on this issue to JFK's growing political skills, centralized control over the federal bureaucracy and a coherent Berlin strategy.

## **Secret Diplomacy**

Along with the official decision-making procedures JFK conducted his Berlin policy through secret channels.

One channel has functioned through his brother Robert Kennedy who began his meetings with the Soviet military intelligence officer Yuri Bolshakov as early as May of 1961 (<http://www.pseudology.org/people/BolshakovYGN.htm>). For example, Kennedy and Khrushchev used this liaison structure to appoint the Vienna summit. According to Beschloss, Washington and Moscow have secretly coordinated their policies on the GDR refugees, including possible border-closing in Berlin (Beschloss 1991: 287-288). As Catudal notes, Kennedy most likely knew about the border-closing and hinted to Khrushchev that he wouldn't strongly oppose it because the migration flow from East Berlin has become a real headache for the American authorities in West Berlin (Catudal 1980: 251). The above-mentioned Bundy's memo of August 14 confirms this position. However, the President was unable to foresee such a strong reaction of West Germans to the Wall construction. To avoid both domestic and international criticism Kennedy tried to make the CIA and Pentagon's intelligence responsible for their 'inability' to predict the Wall construction.

Another secret channel between the White House and Kremlin was created by the Soviet initiative. In late September of 1961 Bolshakov and the Press-Secretary of the Soviet Foreign Ministry Mikhail Kharlamov asked Salinger to hand over Khrushchev's letter to Kennedy (Salinger 1966: 191-198). It was a beginning of a prolonged secret correspondence between Kennedy and Khrushchev that lasted from the Berlin to Cuban missile crisis.<sup>5</sup> In the course of their correspondence the two leaders discussed most sensitive aspects of the Berlin problem. Among the top-ranked officials only Rusk knew about this correspondence.

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<sup>5</sup> The Kennedy-Khrushchev correspondence related to Berlin was published in: *Foreign Relations of the United States 1993*: 444-445, 502-508, 567-580, 643-646, 681-691.

The Robert Kennedy-Bolshakov channel worked also in the critical days of the Checkpoint Charlie military stand (when the U.S. and Soviet tanks confronted each other in the Friedrichstrasse crossing point in late October of 1961). According to Robert Kennedy, the President asked him to get in touch with Bolshakov to discuss the way how to remove both the U.S. and Soviet tanks from Friedrichstrasse and, at the same time, how to save faces for both sides. Robert Kennedy believed that Bolshakov's efforts were crucial for solving the problem (Foreign Relations of the United States 1993: 544).

It should be noted that Kennedy's secret diplomacy had rather contradictory implications for the U.S. Berlin course. On the one hand, JFK has managed to discuss and solve – in a quite pragmatic way - most delicate issues directly with the Soviet leadership. On the other hand, an obvious gap between the U.S. real/secret and public policies on Berlin has emerged. For example, the Berlin Wall construction put Kennedy into an awkward position because he had to choose between, on the one hand, his tacit agreement with Khrushchev on the *de facto* border-closing and, on the other hand, the need to demonstrate his solidarity with West Berliners and the FRG.

Moreover, the establishment of secret channels with Moscow and taking decisions without consultations with top governmental officials had inevitable repercussions on the moral atmosphere in the administration. Some high-ranking officials were frustrated by the lack of President's trust, others were afraid of taking ill-balanced decisions by JFK. In sum, this was not conducive to building a consensus inside the Kennedy administration and developing a sound U.S. strategy on the Berlin issue.

## Conclusions

Several conclusions emerge from the above analysis:

First, it should be noted that Kennedy's perceptions of the Berlin issue were highly ideologically indoctrinated and biased against the USSR and the GDR (the same was true for the Soviet/GDR side). These (mis)perceptions have led to the misinterpretation of Khrushchev's intentions and, finally, taking some wrong (if not dangerous) decisions. The President had to eventually change his perceptions and adapt them to reality.

Some governmental agencies (including the DoS, DoD and CIA) were in the process of structural changes during the Berlin crisis. In the end, these reforms had a positive effect in terms of increasing the U.S. national security apparatus' efficiency. However, in the crisis period their transitional status has created serious obstacles to the proper decision-making and development of a sound Berlin strategy.

Some traditional political actors (such as the CIA and DoD) were, in fact, debarred from decision-making on Berlin because of the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Moreover, in an effort to avoid public criticism the White House made the CIA and the military intelligence 'scapegoats' for their (quasi) inability to predict the Berlin Wall construction.

It also should be noted that there was a culmination of the bureaucratic warfare in the Kennedy administration just amidst the Berlin crisis. The 'tug of war' between the NSC staff and the State Department was the core of this conflict. Finally, the NSC apparatus won a full victory in this 'power struggle'.

The domination of the White House staff in the foreign policy-making process has resulted in essential modification of the crisis management system. The center of decision-making has shifted to the NSC staff. The routine work was done by the inter-agency Berlin task force that consisted of representatives of different governmental agencies but was strictly controlled by the NSC/White House staff.

The role of the NSC as a collective organ that formulated and coordinated the U.S. foreign policy was downplayed under Kennedy. The real power was shifted to the NSC staff headed by Bundy. The President has, in fact, substituted the NSC by other, informal, bodies. For example, in case of Berlin the most important decisions were taken by the Berlin Steering Group that consisted of few top officials loyal to the President.

The Berlin crisis was a turning point in the process of transformation of JFK from a 'freshman' in world affairs to a strong international leader. Since the Berlin crisis Kennedy felt himself much more confident in the foreign policy realm than it was in the formative period of his presidency.

The Berlin crisis has led to establishing a non-traditional element of the decision-making system, namely, the secret channels of communication between the White House and Kremlin. The JFK secret diplomacy had rather ambivalent consequences. On the one hand, secret contacts with Khrushchev helped Kennedy to take more realistic and pragmatic positions on the Berlin problem. Through these secret contacts Kennedy had the possibility to discuss with the Soviets some delicate issues without the pressure from his advisers and the broad public. On the other hand, the U.S.-Soviet informal agreements on Berlin have often confronted the U.S. public diplomacy goals. Kennedy had to 'oscillate' between the quiet diplomacy (dictated by secret agreements with Moscow) and the 'hard' line rhetoric that was produced both for the domestic (the U.S. Congress and public opinion) and international (NATO allies and West Berliners) consumption. Moreover, the top officials' discontent with the JFK secret diplomacy has contributed to the escalation of bureaucratic conflicts inside the Kennedy administration.

On a more general plane, the Berlin crisis has stimulated the development of both theory and practice of strategic planning and crisis management. This experience was helpful in dealing with other, subsequent, international crises which often happened during the Kennedy administration (including the most dangerous one – the Cuban missile crisis).

Finally, one of the most important (but neglected or forgotten) consequences of the Berlin crisis was that it became a starting point of Kennedy's gradual reassessment of his relations with the Soviet Union. At the critical moments of the Berlin crisis (the "Autobahn operation", tank standoff on the Checkpoint Charlie, etc.) he might realized for the first time that the world was on the verge of the large-scale (probably nuclear) war. Kennedy had to undergo one more (Caribbean) international crisis of 1962 to complete the re-evaluation of the U.S.-Soviet relations but it was the Berlin crisis which triggered the whole process.

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